Divine Che Neba, "Entry on: The Orphans and the Old Woman with her Walking Staff by Veronique Mengue ", peer-reviewed by Eleanor A. Dasi and Susan Deacy. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2021). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1284. Entry version as of November 06, 2026.

Veronique Mengue

The Orphans and the Old Woman with her Walking Staff

Cameroon

TAGS: African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions Metamorphosis



We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	The Orphans and the Old Woman with her Walking Staff
Country of the First Edition	Cameroon
Country/countries of popularity	Cameroon
Original Language	Ewondo
Country of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Cameroon
Full Date of the Recording of the Story for the Databasey	December 22, 2018
More Details of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Soa, Centre Cameroon
Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover
Author of the Entry	Divine Che Neba, University of Yaoundé 1, nebankiwang@yahoo.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Eleanor A. Dasi, University of Yaoundé 1, wandasi5@yahoo.com Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Creators



Veronique Mengue (Storyteller)

Age of narrator: 58 (in 2018)

Social status: Commoner

Profession: farming

Language of narration: Ewondo

Bio prepared by Divine Che Neba, University of Yaoundé 1, nebankiwang@yahoo.com

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Additional information

Origin/Cultural Background/Dating	The Beti people are mainly located in the Centre and Southern Regions of Cameroon. A mythic legend amongst the Beti reports that the Beti came from the other side of the River Sanaga. They finally crossed the river at the end of the eighteenth century on the back of a snake called Ngan-Medza. They fled Ousman dan Fodio, a Muslim leader from the region of Adamawa in the north of the country, who decided to Islamise all Animist peoples in Cameroon at the time. The Beti are descendants of the Bantu. They attached a lot of evil to women because they believed that evil (Evu) entered their community through the woman. The Beti society, like most African societies, is patriarchal. Source: Beti. britannica.com (accessed: July 30, 2021).

Summary

Performer: Ekaŋ biso elaŋ elaŋ éé;

Audience: éééé,

Performer: Ekaŋ biso elaŋ elaŋ éé;

Answer: éééé,

Performer: Ekaŋ biso elaŋ elaŋ éé;

Answer: éééé

Performer:: məló məba [two ears]

Audience: məba fɔ [two indeed]

Performer: esame ndolo

Audience: esango;

Performer: esame ndolo;

Audience: esango;

Performer: esame ndolo;

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Audience: answer: esango;

Performer: vogəlán nlaŋ mazu mina lɛ a (Listen to the story I'm going to tell you)

answer: yaaa*

Once in this village there lived a loving and happy couple who had two beautiful daughters. One day, the parents died leaving their children very miserable. They were bound to work hard in order to survive. Shortly after their parents' death, one of the girls got married and went to live with her husband while her sibling remained in the village. Life became very difficult for the girl who remained in the village as she lived alone. Faced with many difficulties, she resorted to paying her married sister a visit. On her way, she found an old woman bathing in a nearby river. This old woman asked her to help her scrub her back. Without hesitating, the orphan placed what she was carrying on the ground, moved towards her, and started scrubbing her back. The gentle and soothing manner in which she scrubbed the old woman's back made the old woman admire her and her beauty and she soon became envious of this beautiful maiden. Because of envy, the old woman struck this young maiden with her walking staff and she immediately transformed into an old woman. This old woman, on her part metamorphosed into the young girl and carried the spinster's luggage and left. She moved directly to the spinster's sister. Upon arrival, the spinster's sister took her for the sister because of her look, so welcomed her, shouting: "My sister has come! She has come." The "old young woman" impersonating her sister, entered the house and they started chatting. In the course of their discussion, the old young woman's answers about news from the village were not coherent. The girl was worried but however, remained aloof.

In the meantime, the other spinster, who is now an old woman, took the walking staff of the original old woman, and gradually followed her to her sister's house. She got to her sister's house only after the old woman. As soon as her sister saw her, she was astonished, and asked, "Madam, who are you? How dare you enter my house? Do I know you?" The sister, together with the old young woman, chased the spinster away. The spinster went out and sat at the veranda, with her head on her laps, wondering. She later moved to seek refuge in a nearby bush around her sister's farm.

One day, the married sister, while harvesting melon seeds in her farm

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together with old woman, heard a melancholic song at a nearby bush. The song caught her attention. She listened and the voice kept telling her something. The melody soon covered the village, yet nobody was reacting. Suddenly, she turned to her impersonated sister, the old woman, and complained of the melody but got no reaction from her. As the spinster was singing, sparrows were eating the melon seeds in the farm. Touched once more by the melody, she interrogated her impersonated married sister who could be singing in that manner. The old woman asked her to ignore it and encouraged her to continue working. The song was sung repeatedly. The married sister decided to find out who was singing because the song rekindled so much in her about her unmarried sister. She moved nearer to where the echoes of the song were coming and listened to the song more keenly and then recognised her sister's voice. She asked her to come out from her hideout. When the old woman (the impersonated sister) saw the spinster who she had transformed into (the impersonating sister), she sang again and again. Then, the married sister asked her: "Who are you and what are you saying in your song?" and this old woman replied: "You chased me, your true sister, away for no good reason." The spinster (who looked old and haggard) narrated the ordeal she went through with the old woman (impersonating her sister) while on her way to visit her. Shocked by this story, the married sister informed the villagers, who converged and compelled the old woman to restore the spinster's original shape and age. With the pressure from the villagers, the old women (the impostor) got her walking stick, stroke the spinster (now looking old and haggard), on her back and she suddenly became young while the other woman became old. The cunning old woman was beaten mercilessly and driven from the village. Since then, all old women with walking staffs are being looked upon as evil, better still witches.

* Opening formulae.

Analysis

World mythologies thrive with mythic characters that undergo major or sometimes irrevocable changes to attain their objectives. In African mythologies such transformations are spotted in animals, insects, vegetation, mortals and immortal beings. What is interesting in the myth is that the transformation is sometimes revocable. The walking

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	staff that transforms the old woman into a young beautiful maiden in the myth is the same that restores her, thus reuniting both siblings.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions Metamorphosis
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Childhood Orphans Siblings Tricksters
Further Reading	Domowitz, Susan, "The Orphan in Cameroon Folklore and Fiction", *Research in African Literatures* 12.3 (1981): 350–358 (accessed: July 30, 2021). Steiger, Brad, *The Werewolf Book: The Encyclopedia of Shape-Shifting Beings*, London: Visible Ink Press, 1999.
Addenda	Researcher: Divine Che Neba Assistant researcher: Ezimbi Jean Yannick Method of data collection: Tape recording and note taking

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